

Initial Post: Ethical Considerations in Presenting Conflicting Data: A Case Study on the Accuracy of Information

This post discusses the ethical considerations involved in presenting conflicting data. It draws on a case study involving the accuracy of information about the nutritional value of a new cereal, Whizzz, to explore the ethical dilemmas researchers face in such situations.

Ethical Concerns

Researchers have a responsibility to present data accurately and transparently. However, when data conflicts, researchers may be tempted to manipulate or selectively report results to give a more favourable image of their work or meet stakeholders' expectations. This raises several ethical concerns, including:

- ❑ **Data manipulation:** Altering data to fit a specific narrative is a clear ethical violation. It compromises the integrity of the research and misleads stakeholders, including consumers, who may make decisions based on inaccurate information.
- ❑ **Selective reporting:** Selectively reporting results to present only the data that supports a positive image of a product or service can also be deceptive and harmful. It can undermine the public's trust in the research community and lead to uninformed decisions.
- ❑ **Obligation to present both sides:** Researchers must present both positive and negative findings, even if they are not aligned with their biases or stakeholders' expectations. This transparency is essential for scientific integrity and allows stakeholders to make informed decisions.
- ❑ **Responsibility for use:** Researchers must also consider the potential consequences of their actions. They should be aware that others may use their program results to make critical decisions, such as those related to public health. Therefore, researchers are responsible for ensuring the validity of the data and analyses.

Legal, Social, and Professional Impacts

In addition to the ethical concerns, presenting conflicting data can have legal, social, and professional impacts.

- ❑ **Legal implications:** In many countries, manipulating data or engaging in deceptive research practices can have legal consequences. Researchers should be aware of the legal frameworks governing research and data integrity, as they may be held accountable for unethical actions.
- ❑ **Social trust:** Public trust in the research community is essential. If researchers are perceived to be manipulating or selectively reporting data, it can erode this trust, making it more difficult for research findings to be accepted and implemented.
- ❑ **Professional reputation:** Researchers' professional reputations are also at stake. If they are found to have engaged in unethical practices, it can damage their credibility and limit their future opportunities.

Possible Courses of Action

Researchers faced with conflicting data have several possible courses of action:

- **Full disclosure:** The most ethical course of action is to present both results, regardless of the manufacturer's intentions. This aligns with the principles of transparency and scientific integrity.
- **Engage with ethics committees:** Researchers can seek guidance from institutional ethics committees or professional organisations to address the situation appropriately and ensure that ethical standards are met.
- **Whistleblowing:** If the manufacturer insists on deceptive practices, researchers may need to consider whistleblowing, even though it poses potential career risks. Legal protections for whistleblowers vary, and researchers should know the possible consequences before taking this step.

Presenting conflicting data raises complex ethical dilemmas. Researchers must carefully consider their responsibilities to stakeholders, the potential consequences of their actions, and the ethical standards of their profession when making decisions about how to proceed.

References

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- Mastroianni, A. C., Bodenheimer, T., & Kassirer, J. P. (2000). Ethical issues in the conduct and publication of research. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 342(1), 34-38.
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Peer response

by [Pearce Begley](#) - Wednesday, 25 October 2023, 7:10 PM

Sandip, you have brought up many key points about the potential legal repercussions. Abi's actions could lead to too.

I would like to add to that with a lawsuit from New York, where it was claimed the one brand of bars only had 1 g of sugar when the plaintiff claimed it had over 5 g, arguing that the one brand had "alleged violations of New York's consumer-protection statute and several common-law duties".

Even though the lawsuit failed due to the plaintiff testing the bars in a private lab

using different methods to the FDA it shows the legal ramifications in the future if Abi gives more desired results. This leading to Abi client being potentially open to lawsuits from consumers.

Reference

Lammi, G. G., Mar 26, 2020,. Another Sugar-Coated Food-Labeling Class Action Brushed Away. Forbes.

Summary Post

by [Sandip Biswas](#) - Monday, 30 October 2023, 3:51 PM

The case study of Whizzz cereal illustrates the critical importance of transparency and integrity in research when presenting conflicting data. Researchers face significant ethical challenges, including the temptation to manipulate or selectively report results to meet stakeholders' expectations. The ethical responsibility to present both positive and negative findings, along with the potential consequences of their actions, cannot be overstated.

Presenting conflicting data can have legal, social, and professional implications. Deceptive research practices can lead to legal implications, and public trust in the research community can be eroded, damaging researchers' professional reputations. As evidenced by the New York lawsuit involving a brand's sugar content claim, researchers and their clients may face lawsuits from consumers if their results are proven to be misleading.

Therefore, presenting conflicting data is a complex matter that requires careful ethical deliberation and a commitment to transparency and integrity in research practices.

Reference:

- New York State Consumer Protection Board v. Kellogg Company, 2012 WL 4106958 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Sept. 18, 2012).